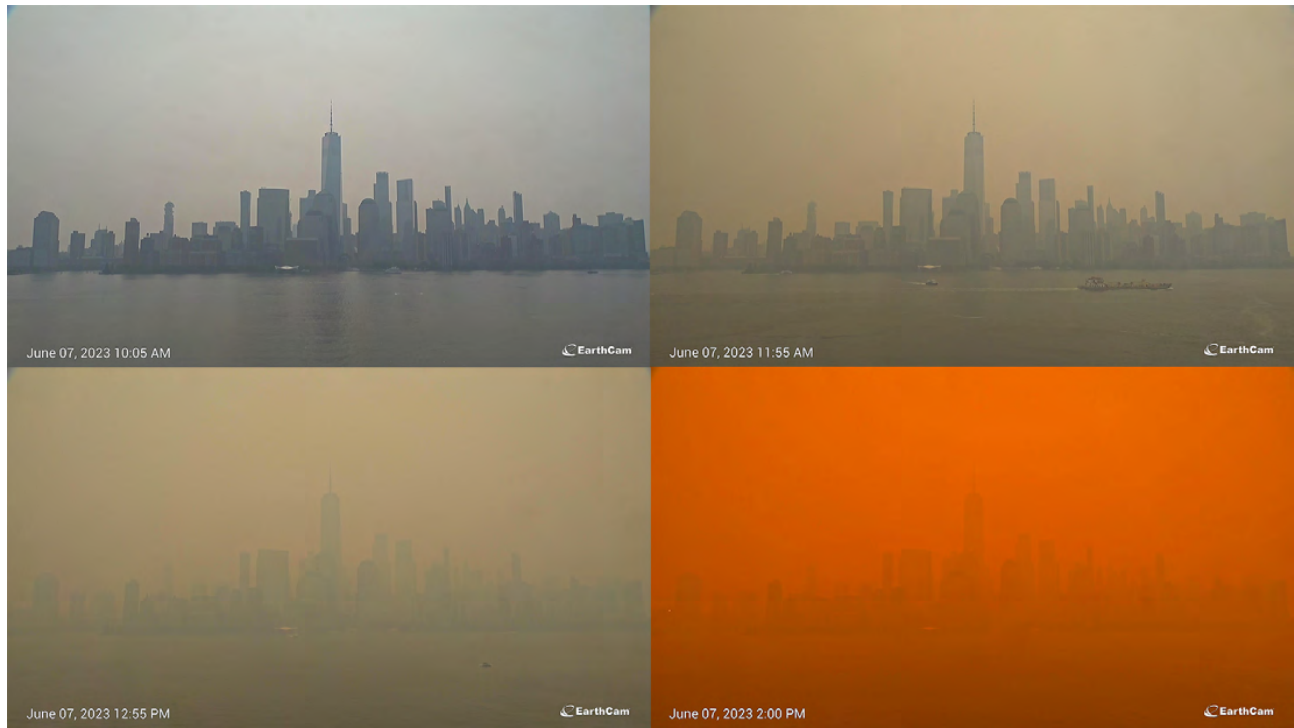


## Some Strange Days in a Place That Has Seen It All

By Michael Wilson, *June 08, 2023*



View of Downtown Manhattan From New Jersey, via [EarthCam](#)

### Unsettling Gloom In New York City Evokes Memories Of Difficult Times

The smoke from wildfires hundreds of miles north that turned New York into a scene of unsettling gloom on Wednesday arrived as if from a burning building blocks away, draping the city in a thick and otherworldly orange-gray hue.

In the air hung the acrid smell of a campfire. Not fog, not mist, not really weather at all — this was something new to even veteran New Yorkers.

Automobile headlights flipped on midday, as drivers struggled to see. Streetlights lit automatically. Busy summertime sidewalks, their noontime shadows blurred out, gradually emptied. A woman leaving a grocery store stopped and pointed her phone's camera toward the blotted-out sky.

Mayor Eric Adams, at a news conference, gave voice to the way many New Yorkers likely felt when they stepped outside: “What the hell is this?”

City leaders urged caution, and to avoid the outdoors, and the reaction was swift. Yellow tape more familiar at crime scenes stretched across playground entrances. School recess yards remained vacant, and parents were urged to be prompt when picking up their children, to avoid keeping them waiting in the thick haze.

The daily bustle in Sunset Park's Chinatown in Brooklyn was absent on Wednesday. “No good,” said Gigi Chen, selling live crabs — three for \$25 — from a stand outside Blue Ocean Market. “Here, afternoons are busy,” she said. “Not today.” As she spoke, a man pushing a cart filled with clean and folded laundry hurried past, as if trying to outrun the odor.

The smoke and plunge in air quality resurrected scenes familiar from the pandemic lockdown in March 2020, and with them, a feeling of helplessness against forces out of our control. Masks returned to faces. Residents checked their screens for fresh data before venturing out — Covid infection rates then, AirNow.gov now.

The needle on the site's Air Quality Index gradually rose for New York City, from the category marked “Unhealthy” to “Very Unhealthy” to, finally, “Hazardous.” Elsewhere in the state, the index was higher still.

Commuters flipped their pandemic precautions, wearing masks as they approached a subway station, and pulling them off before boarding. A small comfort: Smoke is not contagious.

And another, that this should pass relatively soon, with fresh air and the possibility of rain expected as the week continues.

But with the smoke still thick, unfamiliar sights were rife. Several of the popular courts at the Central Park Tennis Center sat empty after players canceled their reservations. Gray curtains of smoke lent a ghostly veil over Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

On Broadway, the play “Prima Facie” was interrupted 10 minutes into the performance when its star, Jodie Comer, experienced difficulty breathing and was escorted offstage.

Outside in Times Square, the scene was more or less normal, with tourists coming and going — although everyone seemed to be talking about the same thing. Rishabh Mehta, 27, visiting the city with his wife and his parents from India, expressed disappointment at the turn of events.

“We cannot see the buildings if we go on top of the observatories,” he said. “It’s suffocating. We can’t walk long distances. If we keep walking long distances, we get tired early.”

Nearby, Rauf Rahimov, 27, a pedicab driver outside Central Park, reclined in the back of his cab where the passengers would sit, if there were any.

“No tourists, no people, no income,” he said. He had made about \$65 so far Wednesday, less than half of a normal day. In Brooklyn, a food deliveryman, Mohammad Uddin, said he was raised in Bangladesh, a country with a persistently unhealthy air quality. But he said nothing there compared to Wednesday in Brooklyn — “Oh, no, no, no, no, no.”

Students gasped as they exited Fordham University’s campus in Manhattan. An instructor said: “Smell that barbecue, man!”

In the Bronx, Jeremiah Ducille, 20, stood in slacks and a necktie next to a table advertising wireless phone service. He normally hates the hot sun and humid temperatures, and looked for comfort in the darkening sky above.

“Now that the smoke is out it’s covering the sun,” he said. “It’s kind of better like this.”

But on a bus traveling down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, passengers could barely make out Central Park several feet outside the window. Gone was the queue of horse-drawn carriages outside a park entrance, another city ruling Wednesday.

“It’s like the smoke got stuck, there’s no breeze,” said Dani Harkin, 54, on the bus. The eerie scenes outside her window reminded her of a very specific day.

“Last night, we didn’t really realize, but it smelled — it smelled like 9/11,” she said. “Like, ‘That’s fire.’ It smelled like the day. I won’t forget that smell.”

Remy Hernandez, 40, a food deliveryman from the Bronx, saw the day through a similarly bleak lens. “To me, it looks like the world is ending,” he said.

Uptown, a young child riding a scooter to school asked his father, “Why is it so foggy outside?”

Reporting was contributed by Olivia Bensimon, Emma G. Fitzsimmons, Sean Piccoli and Michael D. Regan.